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El Salvador: Status of Churchwomen Murder Case

Significant progress has been made recently in the investigation of the murder of the four US churchwomen. The US Embassy in San Salvador is confident that most of the facts have been pieced together and that sometime soon--no date has been determined--six National Guardsmen will be turned over to civilian criminal courts for prosecution.

Written and taped affidavits have been collected from the accused, as well as from most persons even remotely connected to the investigation. One of the guardsmen has confessed to his part in the crime and has implicated the others. Although evidence is not conclusive on the point, the crime appears to have been planned and directed by the junior sergeant in charge of the airport detachment without the knowledge of any higher authority. The sergeant and his five men changed to civilian clothes and specifically targeted the nuns, whom they considered to be "subversive" churchwomen.

Nevertheless, some cover-up after the fact by some mid-level officers in the National Guard probably occurred. This underscores the fact that final disposition of the case still rests with the Armed Forces High Command, which must ease the justice process along without causing major tensions in military ranks.

When the military turns the case over to civilian courts, the US Embassy reports that it will be necessary to hire a private prosecutor representing the families of the victims to augment the efforts of the government prosecutor--this is required under Salvadoran law. An attorney has already agreed in principle to accept the job, and the victims' families are being so notified. Despite the solid case developed by the prosecution, conviction is not necessarily assured. The Salvadoran judicial process has several unique features that could cause problems, and the trial may be affected by the violent environment. There are indications that some pressure already has been aimed at the Attorney General's office from anonymous persons, causing one low-level government attorney to ask to be taken off the case.

State Dept. review completed.

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